

# Big Willie and the Roar of Engines at the Brotherhood Raceway Park

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## Big Willie and the Roar of Engines at the Brotherhood Raceway Park

**B**ig Willie Robinson is in his glory. He is standing before a microphone at the Brotherhood Raceway Park, stabbing the air with a forefinger and bellowing his thanks to God and two mayors for the blessings they've bestowed on him.

Towering over just about everyone, he is like a giant out of mythology, come to deliver what others have helped him create, a drag strip where street kids can direct their energies away from guns and drugs toward the pure, rich roar of car engines.

"Keep this in mind," Willie tells a crowd of about a hundred racers and spectators on a Sunday as bright as diamonds. "The Harbor Department don't want you here. They don't want Big Willie here. They don't want racing here. But we're here."

The drag strip is on Terminal Island, in the shadow of oceangoing ships and long-necked cranes, far from the mean streets Willie wants to clean up.

Getting here hasn't been easy, even for a guy who stands 6 feet, 6 inches tall, arranged in awesome proportions around 300 pounds of muscle and sweat.

For the past dozen years, Big Willie has had to appear before more council members and commissioners than he ever dreamed existed, begging and bellowing for a place his dragsters could

call their own.

I met him in 1981, just after the L.A. Harbor Commission had shut down a track his Brotherhood of Street Racers had occupied for seven years. Willie was in a rage; his 58-inch chest huffing up like he was going to blow the world away.

When he calmed down he said something that has proved prophetic: "For a while, we got the thugs and lowriders off the streets. Now they'll be back on the streets, and we're all gonna be going to some funerals."

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His real name is Willie Andrew Robinson III. At 51, he's lost none of the passion that has driven him to believe a drag strip could help bring peace to the troubled streets.

The Terminal Island track, opened just a week ago, has already attracted members of five gangs from the neighborhoods of South-Central, the barrios of East L.A. and the flatlands of the San Fernando Valley.

"They came here, they shook hands and they raced," Willie says. "There wasn't even a hint of violence. They didn't come here to fight."

Big Willie courted their presence. He strode onto

their turf days after the harbor commissioners voted under pressure from Mayor Dick Riordan to once more allow drag-racing on the waterfront.

He told the gang members it was a time for L.A. to start over again, and he, Big Willie Robinson, was going to be a catalyst for that new beginning.

When the track was closed in 1981, Willie, backed by then-Mayor Tom Bradley, tried to get the Harbor Commission to change its mind, but its members were adamant in their refusal.

He was similarly rejected by the Airport Commission when he sought a vacant piece of land in a corner of L.A. International. Acreage in Palmdale was offered, but Willie knew it was too far away to lure the street kids of L.A.

Just about then, the drive-by shootings began. "I called Bradley and said, 'The body count has started,'" Willie says. "For a while, I called him with every death on the street, but then I lost track."

Willie never stopped trying to create a new drag strip, relying on his parents and in-laws to help him pay the rent as he lobbied for a track. But interest in his efforts waned in civic circles . . . until the spring of '92.

Riots turned L.A. into a fiery hell, bringing a new awareness to the rage and frustrations that

smoldered in parts of the city so often ignored.

L.A.'s power elite began looking around for ways to ease the frustrations and dampen the rage. Willie saw that his time had come and lobbied anew for a drag strip.

"Suddenly," he says, "they all had their arms around Big Willie and were asking me what I wanted. I said what Big Willie wants is a racetrack."

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Apologetic for his waning interest, Bradley told Willie to start looking around for a new site. Willie found it and, supported by the new mayor, he got his track.

Now he is all pride and thunder as he stands at the mike this gleaming Sunday, thanking God, Bradley and Riordan for bringing him to this day. He is only guaranteed the site for a year, but he's sure they'll get a permanent place when the time is up.

Meanwhile, he's out to prove what he contends, that he can purify the streets. He's already busy purifying the track, booming over the p.a. system that he will not tolerate booze, drugs or violence.

"You break the rules," he roars, "and you're liable to get your ass kicked." And he leaves no doubt in anyone's mind who's liable to be doing the kicking.

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